

Be The Man vs Be a Man: Surplus Value, Choose Hard, Moral Wisdom

By Dr Justin Coulson

My new book, *Boys: Building Strong Young Men From the Inside Out*, is about healthy masculinity. One of the questions I get most often is: **what does that actually look like in practice?**

Here's where I start.

Every boy grows up and is confronted by what I call the gender police - typically other boys his own age who have clear, and often unhealthy, ideas about what it means to be a man. Sometimes it might also be people in his home: his dad (or mum), brothers, grandparents, and others. They put him in a gender straitjacket and explain how "that's not what a boy does", or "you're acting like a little girl."

As he ages, people start saying things like "be a man". "Man up". "Grow a pair". And more. The "Boy Code" demands that your son be a man - and the sooner, the better. In this view, being a man means being strong, unemotional, and focused on conquest. Dominance and strength are king. Status is the currency of the realm. And masculinity is anything but feminism.

Sometimes, these attributes are helpful. Often, they're taken in unhealthy directions and boys internalise the wrong messages - particularly when their peers start to push heavily at your son, telling him that he's "the man".

My counter to that is simple. **Teach your son to focus less on being *the* man, and more on being a man.**

"The man" is consumed by how others see him. "A man" is concerned with how he sees others. "The man" is focused on what he can get. "A man" is oriented to what he can give. "The man" throws his weight around. He wants to dominate, subjugate, and build status. "A man" is secure enough in himself to be oriented to how he can help. He wants to support, lift, and build others.

In *Boys*, I suggest three things we can teach our sons to help that shift happen.

The surplus value mindset. A healthy man helps the people around him feel safer and stronger. He shows up as a bonus. He adds value rather than extracts it - in friendships, in families, in workplaces. He's the guy who stacks chairs after an event. He crosses to the other side of the street so a woman walking alone in the dark doesn't feel uncomfortable or fearful because she doesn't need to walk past him. This kind of masculinity is the sort that emphasises giving rather than taking. It's considerate, respectful, and strong.

The path of resistance. Everything in our culture pushes boys toward cheap dopamine. Screens provide the easy scroll. Life hacks (or AI) provide the shortcut. And boys will often do anything for a quick hit of status. As I interviewed them, I consistently heard the refrain that "you've got to look good in front of your mates". And looking good usually means doing something that will get you status. The quicker and easier it is, the better. But the research is clear: boys who choose the harder path - who train when they don't feel like it, who sit with frustration rather than escaping it, who do the reps - develop the character that actually lasts. The path of *least* resistance makes men weak. The path of *more* resistance is where the power lies. The hills make you strong. Teach him to choose the hills.

Moral wisdom and courage. Knowing what's right is one thing. Doing it when it costs you something is another. Boys need practise at both. A good man is one who speaks up. A good man is a friend who tells the truth when it's easier to say nothing. The young man who walks away from something wrong even when everyone else stays is showing a level of moral strength, wisdom, and courage that marks him as a man. This is the hardest one to teach, but it's also the most important. It starts with conversation: where have you seen someone do the right hard thing? What did it look like? How did it feel?

None of this happens in a single talk. It happens across a thousand small moments in the car, over dinner, and wherever else you can throw questions at your son in trusting conversation. Girls, too, need to hear these conversations about masculinity. It teaches them exactly what they should be looking for in the boys and men in their lives: boys who help those around them feel safer and stronger, choose the hard thing over the easy thing, and have the courage to choose what's right, even when no one else is.

Ask your son or daughter where they've seen the boys and men around them living up to these standards. Ask your son where he's done these things. Talk about what it looks and feels like when someone does the opposite.

Those conversations, accumulated over years, build the image of manhood worth becoming (for boys) or worth aligning yourself with (for girls)..

Not the man. A man. A good man. A real man.



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